

The 2004 Families & Education Levy



Frequently Asked Questions

- **What is the Families and Education Levy?**

In 1990 and 1997 the Families and Education levy was passed by Seattle voters to support families and ensure children and youth are “safe, healthy and ready to learn.” The levy funds a variety of programs in schools, as well as other services delivered through City agencies, community-based organizations, health clinics and other providers. These programs include early childhood development, out-of-school time, family support and involvement, student educational support and health services. A Levy Oversight Committee, a Citizens Advisory Committee and Mayor Greg Nickels have developed a \$103 million proposal for a 2004 renewal of the Families and Education Levy. If the City Council approves it, the new levy will be on the ballot this fall.

- **How does the 2004 levy proposal differ from the 1997 levy?**

The 2004 levy takes a new direction. The proposal before the Council reflects comments from hundreds of citizens and incorporates recommendations from both the Levy Oversight Committee and the Citizens Advisory Committee. The proposal’s ultimate goal is to improve academic achievement among children and youth, and close the academic achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity, language and income. It does this by:

- Significantly increasing resources funneled into early learning, particularly preschool and community-based family involvement services.
- Increasing support for programs that specifically address the needs of kids who are not performing at grade level or who are at risk of not graduating. These include case management and after-school activities supporting academic success for middle and elementary school students.
- Expanding the involvement of community-based organizations with a track record of improving academic achievement for children.

Overall, the proposal supports positive child, youth and family programs so that all of Seattle’s children are healthy, ready for school, and can succeed academically.

- **How was this new levy approach developed?**

An extensive two-year process involving many people examined the successes of the last levy and the needs of children and families, and asked community members how priorities have changed. The process began with the Levy Oversight Committee, a seven-member panel of citizens, elected officials and school district officials established by the last levy to advise on levy spending. With expert and community input, the Levy Oversight Committee adopted a policy framework for renewal of the levy. It outlines levy goals, the role of the City of Seattle in education, and the potential strategic areas of services investment. A Citizens Advisory Committee was established to recommend services in which the new levy should invest, consistent with the Levy Oversight Committee’s policy framework. The Citizens Advisory Committee has 42 members representing a broad cross-section of the community with expertise in the proposed strategic areas of investment.

- **Why did the Levy Oversight Committee and Citizens Advisory Committee recommend setting a new direction for levy funding?**

Not all children walk through Seattle Public School doors equally prepared to learn, and, once there, not all children and youth succeed in school. Discipline rates, attendance, grades, test scores and drop-out rates show a shocking disproportionality between children of color and children from low-income families, and more affluent children. (Disproportionality means certain groups of children have low levels of academic performance compared with their peers.) The Mayor and many community leaders find this unacceptable. The new proposal targets those children and youth who need the most help in order to close the achievement gap in schools, so that all children and families have a chance to succeed.

- **How will this approach specifically address the achievement gap in public schools?**

To close the achievement gap, some levy programs focus on children and youth with the greatest needs. Because all levy-funded programs will be required to show measurable outcomes, progress will be tracked and the community will see results in certain indicators of academic achievement such as attendance rates, test scores, discipline rates and grades. The goal is to help close the achievement gap in public schools for all kids.

- **Why the emphasis on academics? Isn't that the school district's job?**

The levy proposal emphasizes academics because a significant number of students, mostly children of color and children from low-income families, are not performing at grade level and are dropping out of school. Research shows that early learning, family support and involvement, after-school activities that include educational support, and health services significantly improve a student's chances of success. That's the goal, and it's even more important that action is taken now to prepare children for state-mandated guidelines for schools. In 2008, passing the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) will be required for high-school graduation. If the people of Seattle don't do all we can to significantly increase the number of children who pass the test, there will be serious implications for our society and our economy that will place huge burdens on other publicly funded systems — courts, prisons, medical care and human services. The levy seeks to give every child and every family a chance for success in school.

- **Are the levy outcomes academic only?**

No. The outcomes, or desired results, relate to academic, social and emotional success. For example, some of the outcomes in each investment area may include:

- Early Learning: Children will enter kindergarten with the skills needed to succeed; children will read and write at grade level in third grade; families will be involved in their children's preschool; parents will read to their children more often.
- Family Involvement and Family Support: Families will be involved in their children's education; families will access services to meet basic needs; and student attendance will improve.
- Out-of-School Time: Student attendance will improve; students will perform at grade level; families will be connected with schools; and graduation rates will improve.
- High-Risk Middle and High School Age Youth: Student attendance, grades and graduation rates will improve, and student discipline rates will decrease.
- Student Health: Students will have increased access to health care, there will be fewer teenage pregnancies and a lower incidence of sexually transmitted diseases.

- **Will the levy serve all students in the city?**

Yes. The levy does put an emphasis on helping children who most need help, but a variety of services for all children will continue. For example, school-based health clinics, school nurses, family support, and certain after-school programs will be available to all children.

- **What criteria were used to determine which children will receive the most help under the new levy proposal?**

While many Seattle students are doing well, studies show that at an early age students of color and low-income students are falling behind students from more advantaged families. This trend continues through the school years — two out of three students district wide graduate, and only half of the students of color graduate. The Citizens Advisory Committee, Levy Oversight Committee and Mayor considered several questions during the levy development process to figure out who needed help the most, how to best help them, and how to measure success. They developed a continuum of integrated services from early childhood and elementary school to middle and high school that help students who are at high risk of failing in school. They also included critical programs that serve all children and families, such as the school-based health centers, middle school athletic programs and middle school after-school activities.

- **How does the new levy funding differ from general funding by the City?**

In past levies, levy dollars and City general fund dollars were often pooled to fund programs. As part of the 2004 levy proposal, levy dollars will fund programs that have a direct link to academic performance, and general fund dollars will support more broadly focused programs that serve children and families but are not necessarily tied specifically to academic performance. Through a careful planning process, the Families and Education Levy proposal and the City's general fund will pay for a complementary, comprehensive continuum of programs and services for children, youth and families, from preschool through high school.

- **Will programs currently funded by the levy but not funded in the levy renewal be funded from the City's general fund?**

Funding for other programs that help children and families will be provided for in the City's general fund. As part of the City's effort to ensure it funds programs that get results, community-based organizations will compete for those funds through the City's Request for Proposals (RFP) system and, like levy-funded programs, will need to demonstrate that their programs are successful. An outcomes-based RFP process defines the population who should benefit from programs, the outcomes to be achieved and, when possible, describes the best way to achieve those goals. The City provides technical assistance to all organizations interested in responding to levy and general fund RFPs.

- **Why do the Mayor and the members of the Levy Oversight Committee and Citizens Advisory Committee believe this new approach will work?**

Several reasons:

- Improving school readiness is an important factor in closing achievement gaps. Children who are not ready for kindergarten struggle to catch up, and many never do. High-quality early childhood education programs can help children prepare for school and perform better during the early years of school. Parent and family involvement improves student achievement, attitudes, homework and report-card grades. Surveys of parents show that most families want to be able to guide their children in school, but parents say they need more information and skills about how to effectively be involved in their children's education.
- At times, many families find themselves lacking basic needs or trying to cope with overwhelming financial and emotional challenges. Family support services help families overcome these difficulties so they can better meet the developmental needs of their children and be actively involved in their children's education.
- Children and youth only spend about 20 percent of their waking hours in school, leaving many more hours free — free for risky behaviors, or for academic opportunity. Research shows after-school programs provide important academic and non-academic benefits for elementary and middle-school students.
- Youth who are not doing well in school and are at risk for criminal behavior need focused attention. They need to establish respectful and trusting relationships with adults who can connect them to services and activities that will engage them in school and in their communities. This type of programming effectively increases academic success, reduces delinquent behavior, and helps youth develop positive goals for the future.
- Today, students face complex physical and mental health problems. Many of these problems create significant barriers to learning and exacerbate the academic performance gap. School is a logical place to address a range of student health needs.

- **Who supports the new approach?**

A growing number of community leaders, parents and others embrace the levy proposal. They include former Mayor Norm Rice, who says: "This levy proposal sets a bold new direction for kids and families in Seattle. Every element brings positive change for children." To read more from the community, visit www.seattle.gov/mayor/issues/edlevy_quotes.htm.

- **How will success of the levy be measured?**

All of the investments in the levy proposal are tied to specific and measurable indicators of success. For example, programs that receive levy funding will be required to show their students are making improvements in attendance, discipline and other measures of academic achievement. Each year, \$200,000 of the levy will be set aside for rigorous evaluation of progress in making improvements in the lives of children. The evaluation component of the levy is critical to making adjustments so that investments are moved out of services that are not working and into services that are working.

- **How did the Families and Education Levy originate?**

In 1990, Mayor Norm Rice called an education summit where community and business leaders, educators and parents came together to talk about how to do more for kids. The first \$69 million Families and Education Levy grew from that community effort. In November 1990, Seattle voters approved this unique initiative for the future of the city's children. The focus of the first levy was to provide children and youth services that help them be ready to learn when they entered the classroom and to be healthy, and to promote positive emotional and social development. The Families and Education Levy was renewed in 1997 at the same amount.

- **How does the levy financing and administration work?**

The Families and Education Levy, like other property-tax levies, collects property tax money based on the value of homes. The money is allocated by the City of Seattle — through contracts or a Request for Proposal system — to the Seattle School District and community-based organizations.

- **How much will this levy cost in property taxes?**

The average value of a home in Seattle is \$336,000. The owner of a home with that value would pay \$58 per year. The 1997 levy is costing the owner of a \$336,000 home \$34 per year.

- **Is this levy the same as the “latte tax”?**

No. The latte tax was a sales tax proposal that, had voters passed it, would have exclusively funded early-learning efforts in Seattle. The Families and Education Levy proposal helps children, youth and families from early learning years through high school.

- **Is the levy the same as the League of Education Voters Initiative, the so-called P-16 initiative?**

No. The Families and Education Levy is a Seattle-specific, pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, property tax funded proposal. It focuses on out-of-school support — including preschool, after-school activities and health care. The League of Education Voters' initiative is a statewide, P-16, sales-tax proposal. It would focus mostly on in-school support such as teacher salaries and curriculum, and provide preschool to some low-income 3- to 5-year-olds statewide.

- **Voters approved two Seattle School District levies in February of this year. How is this one different?**

The two levies on the ballot in February were school district levies for building schools and continuing general school-based operations. Money from those measures goes directly to the school district. The Families and Education Levy funds preschool, after-school programs, family involvement and support, and student health care. Money is collected and dispersed by the City.

- **How does the levy relate to the Seattle School District's priorities?**

The Seattle School District's mission is academic achievement for every student in every school, and its goals include to close the academic achievement gap. The Families and Education Levy proposal supports this mission and helps close the achievement gap by helping children be better prepared to start school, stay in school, avoid trouble at school, get better grades and graduate.

- **Is the proposal funding family support workers?**

Yes. Family support workers are employees of Seattle Public Schools and work in the schools helping families access resources to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, housing and job searching services. The levy proposal provides the exact dollar amount the school district requested for family support workers — \$2,125,000 per year.

- **Under the proposed levy, how is “family support” different from “family involvement?”**

Family support connects families with basic services such as food, clothing, housing and job searching. Research shows that when families have their basic needs met and are functioning well, they are more likely to get involved in their children’s education. Family involvement, meanwhile, gets family members involved in children’s education with the goal of improving student achievement, attitudes, homework and aspirations. These programs help and encourage parents to prepare their preschoolers for kindergarten, read to them, help them with their homework, attend parent-teacher conferences and other school activities, and advocate for their children in the school system. The proposed levy allocates \$500,000 per year for community-based organizations to provide family involvement services to help bridge home and school.

- **Is the Family Partnerships program funded in the 2004 levy proposal?**

The current levy funds family involvement in the schools through a program called Family Partnerships. That will be changed under the new levy. The Levy Oversight Committee feels strongly that family involvement is best provided by staff working in culturally sensitive and knowledgeable community-based organizations, who can help parents participate more fully in their children’s education. These organizations will provide workshops for parents on how to talk with teachers about school assignments, how to help their children with homework, how to stay on top of school activities and what to do if children get in trouble at school.

- **Is the Middle School Support Fund in the new levy proposal?**

The Citizens Advisory Committee evaluated and endorsed a new approach to support middle school students in the 2004 levy proposal — the Partnerships for Student Success after-school program. This program will significantly increase the amount of levy funding that supports middle school students, building on the Community Learning Center after school program model which has shown great success in improving academic success in Seattle and across the nation. The current Middle School Support program, which is funded under the 1997 levy and provides each middle school principal with \$10,000 to \$80,000 to administer programs of their choice, was not selected for funding by the Levy Oversight Committee, and the Mayor supported that recommendation. Some felt it funded services that were traditionally the responsibility of the school district. Also, an evaluation of the Middle School Support program found that resources were not sufficient to impact desired outcomes.

- **How does the levy proposal support student health care?**

The proposal continues a commitment to supporting student health. It renews funding for 14 school-based health centers and funds a half-time school nurse in each school that has one of these centers, as well as a full-time nurse practitioner at each site. Combined with the Seattle School District-funded nurses, 50 nurses will serve the district's 47,000 students, seven of the nurses funded by the levy. (This year, the district has 54 nurses, 11 of them levy funded.)

The levy proposal does include a change in how the health centers are funded. The City recently commissioned a study which concluded that billings to Medicaid and private insurance companies, when appropriate, would generate revenue and allow the health centers to serve even more children. The levy will incorporate this approach, which other cities with school-based health centers have implemented successfully. The study also recommends organizational and operational changes to improve program efficiency, integration into the schools and evaluation — all suggestions that the levy proposal also incorporates.

- **Will the reduction of four school nurses mean reduced services to students?**

No. Recent studies show ways schools can provide health programs more efficiently without reducing services to students. Naturally, the school district could choose to fund additional health services staff if desired. School nurses are primarily a school district funding responsibility — the Seattle School District currently funds 43 of its 54 nurses.

- **Will athletic programs in the schools be funded?**

The levy currently funds athletics in middle schools through the After School Activities Program. This will continue in the 2004 levy proposal. In addition, the City's general fund and Pro Parks Levy support academic and recreational after-school programs throughout the city, such as youth sports leagues, fitness and swimming lessons, teen centers and job training.

- **Are crossing guards included in the Families and Education Levy proposal?**

No. Crossing guards are funded through the City's general fund. Because the levy is focused on academic achievement and crossing guards do not link to children performing at grade level, the Mayor intends to continue funding crossing guards from the general fund.

- **Are family centers funded by the proposed levy?**

Because family centers provide a broad range of services for families and children — including parenting skills, economic self-sufficiency, social support and access to basic services — and are not directly tied to academic achievement, the Mayor and Levy Oversight Committee decided to fund family centers from the City's general fund. Family centers are critical to building strong families and healthy communities — one of the Mayor's top priorities.

- **Partnerships for Student Success are new to the levy budget. What is the experience with these centers and why were they added?**

The City and Seattle Public Schools have funded community-based after school programs and Community Learning Centers for the past several years with federal grants, private funds and general fund resources. Physically based in Seattle schools and operated by the Parks Department and community-based organizations, the centers have successfully offered a variety of healthy out-of-school time activities for children and youth. The new Partnerships for Student Success programs proposed in the levy will be offered in schools and in neighborhood settings, and will serve approximately 10 Seattle middle schools and 10 high-need elementary schools. Parents, extended family members and community members will be added to the successful Community Learning Centers model to create the Partnerships for Student Success' out-of-school time programs.

- **How are immigrant and refugee children and families helped under the proposed levy?**

The levy focuses on children and youth who need the most academic help. Many immigrant and refugee children and youth are not doing well in school, in part because they don't speak English or are not familiar with the educational system. These students and families require support that meets their unique experiences and needs. All levy services will recognize and respect the beliefs, language, communication styles, behaviors and strengths of each child and family. Community-based organizations that have a successful history of serving immigrant and refugee families will provide some of these services.

- **The levy provides preschool services — Early Learning Networks — to 400 4-year-olds each year. How do these programs relate to the Head Start and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) programs?**

Head Start and ECEAP provide preschool services for children in families earning less than 110 percent of the federal poverty level. The proposed levy preschool programs — called the Early Learning Networks — will serve 400 4-year-old children every year from low-income families earning between 110 and 300 percent of the federal poverty level. The Early Learning Networks will provide preschool services four half-days per week, and will also pay for high-quality child care for the hours when children are not in preschool. Together, these programs are designed to reach all low-income families who need but can't afford preschool services. The City will encourage collaboration among these programs, including creating a coordinated recruitment, application and eligibility review process.

- **Will community members be involved in the planning and development of the Early Learning Networks?**

Yes. Community members, parents, schools, Head Start, ECEAP and child care experts will be involved in setting the program standards and developing the levy preschool programs plan.

- **Where will the preschool classes be located? Do they build upon the existing child care and preschool system?**

The classrooms will be located in elementary schools, community centers or existing child care centers in two geographic areas of the city — those with the highest numbers of children living in low-income families and children who need the most help in school. Funds for the new preschool services will be granted based on a Request for Proposal (RFP) process. Successful bidders will likely include schools and existing preschool and child-care programs that meet the standards required for high-quality early learning. In addition to the levy investment in early learning, the Mayor has set preliminary priorities for his proposed 2005-2006 budget that include at least \$1 million in child care subsidies for low-income children.

- **How is the Seattle Youth Involvement Network being funded?**

Because the Seattle Youth Involvement Network has a mission broader than academic achievement — to develop leadership skills and engage youth in their community — it will not be funded by the levy. It will be considered for general fund support along with other community-based programs that are important to the overall positive development of young people and the community.

- **Is Project Liftoff, now called SOAR, in the new levy proposal?**

City funding of Project Liftoff/SOAR has and will continue to come from the general fund.

- **How will decisions be made around measurement and evaluation?**

The City of Seattle will coordinate with the Seattle School District and community-based agencies to develop outcome measures and evaluation strategies. The Levy Oversight Committee will review and comment on these plans. City agencies and community partners that support children and families are creating an accountability and evaluation system that will continue the outcomes-based contracting and monitoring process, and make sure levy programs are consistent with “best practices,” meaning those that have been proven to work.